

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Mary Ellen Richardson Nakoa

"Mostly Hawaiian families used to live there [Kō'ele]. The husbands all work cowboys. They work from early, from before the sun up. And when they home is after the sun get down. Sometime they not even home. They stay out in the field, you know, in the kiawe trees, especially when they have to gather all the cattle and bring it up."

Mary Ellen Richardson Nakoa, or "Suki," as she is known to almost everyone, is the fourth of seven children and the older daughter born to Ernest and Rebecca Richardson. She remembers the long hours her father worked as a Lāna'i Ranch cowboy, the many chores she and her sister Charlotte performed along with her mother, and the happy weekends and summers spent down at her grandparents' home in Keomuku.

A 1954 Lāna'i High and Elementary School graduate, she married Theodore Nakoa in 1958. They have four children. She is presently a custodian at Nanākuli High School on O'ahu. Suki is very much interested in Lanai's history and is the keeper of the records and photographs of the Kaopuiki and Richardson families.

Tape No. 16-15-1-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Mary Ellen Richardson Nakoa (MN)

September 18, 1988

Kō'ele, Lāna'i

BY: Mina Morita (MM)

MM: This is an interview with Mary Ellen Richardson Nakoa, whose nickname is "Suki," on September 18, 1988 at Kō'ele, Lāna'i. The interviewer is Mina Morita.

Okay, Suki, let's start off with your full name.

MN: Mary Ellen Louisiana Mailelehua Richardson Nakoa.

MM: Okay, and your . . .

MN: Nickname is Suki.

MM: Okay, and your birth date?

MN: September 13, 1935, Kō'ele, Lāna'i.

MM: You were born at home?

MN: At home.

MM: Oh, okay. Do you know who delivered you?

MN: No. I don't know.

MM: Okay. And your parents' names?

MN: Ernest and Rebecca Kaopuiki Richardson.

MM: Okay. Your mother's maiden name was. . .

MN: Kaopuiki.

MM: And your brothers and sisters?

MN: I had seven altogether. Ernest, Lawrence, myself--no, no, wait. Ernest, Lawrence, George, and myself, and Timmy [Timothy], Charlotte and Clarence.

MM: Okay. Let's see. Can you tell what your earliest memories of the ranch are?

MN: Well, let's see. I remember my father worked as a cowboy Monday through Thursdays. And Friday, they have slaughter day. And Saturday, they work down at the piggery. Ko'ele used to have a piggery, too. So every Saturday they work piggery. Then Sunday is their off day.

MM: So, but do you recall anything as a young . . .

MN: Well, I remember the cattle used to come down here in the road. Then they have the big pasture pen right alongside of [where] the new hotel [The Lodge at Ko'ele is] now. They cut the calves from the mother and then they put all the mothers in the pasture across the street down near the slaughterhouse area. Every Friday, they have branding.

MM: So did you as a little girl remember specifically the branding?

MN: Yeah, we used to stay on the fence, and look. Watch the branding. Every day when we go to school, they have the steers--no, the bulls. They had the bulls in the pen near the road. So whenever we pass there, they (stayed near the fence). Well, when we were children, we always grab the stones or the sticks and we fly it at the bulls, and they come chasing us near the fence. Good thing the fence was blocking the way. So every week, the bulls would be in that pen. Then, Fridays, they (weren't) there. (The cowboys) usually take (them) out (or they go to the slaughterhouse). They'd have (about twenty) bulls in there. But they usually change it. Every week the (cowboys) take (the cattle) out and let them go (down) Keomuku area (or to the slaughterhouse).

MM: You have any specific memories of before you started school?

MN: Nah, just play with all the other kids. Well, we used to have swing right in front the washroom there. The washroom, big washroom that all the cowboy wives or, anyway, the Ko'ele wives used to use. So, all the children stay right there by the swing. And that's all we do is just play until . . .

MM: So, can you describe where the washroom was in relationship to the houses?

MN: Well, there were ten--wait, one, two, three, four, five, six. There were two big homes on the Keomuku end. Then they had six small homes on the back row. Then they have one, two, three, four. Four smaller homes, the second row facing the city area with the big washroom and public bath. They had another small home on the first row and a big recreation hall that used to be the single boys' home. It's just a big hall and then they had partition for the single boys. Dad [Ernest Richardson] used to live in there when he was single, with his brother [John Richardson]. When they [each] got married then they had a home. Then they had a parking area right in front

there. Hibiscus hedges enclosed each home (with a picket fence). Everybody had their yard to do every Saturday. Each family and their children all cleaning yard. When one family, especially us, Dad and all his children used to clean yard every Saturday before we can go to the movie. If there's cowboy movie down in town, then Dad and his children all go to the movie. Mother, no, she didn't care to go so she usually stay home.

MM: Okay. So each yard was sectioned off by a . . .

MN: Hibiscus hedges and a picket fence.

MM: And, let's see. Then there was the public bathroom, then a separate washhouse?

MN: After a while. I don't know what year. I'm not sure what year that each home had a bathroom. But before then, everybody used that one big building. They had one side for the men, one side for the ladies, and the other side is wash tray, where the people used to wash all their clothing. They carried their buckets down there. I think had one, two, three, four, five. Ten washtubs. And they all wash by hand with the washboard.

MM: Was there some place to heat water or. . . .

MN: Well, they had a heater right there.

MM: Oh, what kind of heater?

MN: Um, kerosene heater. They had hot water.

MM: And so. . . .

MN: Everybody wash by hand. They bring all their laundry there. Each mother. Yeah, they wash with hot water.

MM: And they wash by hand . . .

MN: Wash by hand.

MM: . . . rinse it out and then take it out to hang?

MN: Oh, yeah, yeah. They carry their laundry to their homes. (Each home had its own clothesline.)

MM: Did the ladies meet at a certain time or . . .

MN: No, they just . . .

MM: . . . go their own?

MN: Yeah, well, whoever wants to get there early, the ones (who) have more laundry, they go early. Usually there's another lady there

washing. And then pretty soon, another lady come with their laundry so the others say, "Oh, I'm almost done." So the others, they just---I guess they just know, they take turn. Because from their home they can see if the washroom is busy or not. Then they usually come when it's not busy, or not too many people there.

MM: I see. And then, well, this is before you went to school, huh?

MN: Yeah, (and during my early years of school).

MM: And then the playground was right in front?

MN: Right in the front and they had big swing. And then, well, we had all kind games. We had a lot of toys there so that kept us busy. Usually if the younger babies, the mothers usually put (them) in a paper box or in a tub. We used to have that big tub. You know that kind pakini? Yeah. The babies in there and they put their milk or their juice, and the other children play right nearby. Yeah . . .

MM: For watch them?

MN: . . . we keep our---yeah. And then the mother just watch. Oh, maybe another mother, when they finish their washing and they see (the babies), then they come over. They all help one another. Some of them, if they hear the baby cry, then they come out from their home. They come get the baby. They walk the baby. Usually they all help out. Hawaiians. Mostly Hawaiian families used to live there. The husbands all work cowboys. They work from early, from before the sun up. And when they home is after the sun get down. Sometime they not even home. They stay out in the field, you know, in the kiawe trees, especially when they have to gather all the cattle and bring it up.

MM: So when you were a real young girl, what was the typical day like? You know, what time did the family start waking up?

MN: Oh, early. Early. Mom and Dad in the kitchen maybe about four o'clock. Four o'clock and then Dad gone. Then my older brothers get ready for go to school.

MM: But your father would leave for work at what time?

MN: (Chuckles) I don't know. I don't know what time but I know it's dark. And sometime we hardly see him.

MM: And then your brothers get up and get ready for school . . .

MN: Yeah.

MM: . . . and that was about what time?

MN: Oh, probably about 6:30.

MM: And then how did they get to school?

MN: Oh, they have bus. The old man Niibu, I think---well, during my time when I went to school, we had the old man Niibu and Kawasaki. They come on the bus. The school have a bus, small little bus. And sometime we used to use the bus that carried the make man. (Chuckles) The hearse. I remember it's a brown bus with those two side seat and open back. And that's the kind of bus we go to school. Only if the other regular school bus broke down. When it rains, sometimes we have to walk down the hill because those days didn't have asphalt road. It's muddy, (and) the bus cannot climb the hill, so we walk down. We usually walk home (from school or catch a ride with friends or family).

MM: And then after---okay, so before you went to school and your brothers were sent off to school, kind of what was your mother's schedule like?

MN: Watch babies. Usually watching babies, doing the housework. Washing. All the time she is by the sink (either washing or cooking).

MM: Washing.

MN: Washing and washing dishes and ironing. That's about all I can remember. Usually it's either by the sink or by the ironing board. Then, sometimes, once in a while she's in the yard talking story.

MM: How did you get your groceries? I mean, where did the food come from?

MN: (We had a vegetable garden, and from the store.) I know, I remember when, well, a little older when we used to go with my father down (to) the piggery, we'd come home with all the pork and the intestine of the pig, and my father cooked. My father cooked all that things from the piggery because my mother doesn't cook that. Then after a while, my mother learned how to cook those, but she doesn't eat. Just my father and us, you know, feed the kids. We eat goat meat and sheep and the pig. My father used to have vegetable garden, because we used to plant carrots. You know, just go out there and pull the carrots, wash it, and eat it just like that. (Cabbage, potatoes, and beans. We raised rabbits, chickens, and goats and we ate them.)

MM: How about after school when the kids come home, was there any . . .

MN: Oh, yeah, they had---I know my older brother have to go out and feed the rabbits and the chickens.

MM: So you kept rabbits and chickens?

MN: Yeah, my dad kept rabbits and chickens. And we used to eat all those, too. In the morning, my brother go out and get eggs and

bring it in. What else we had? We had goats.

MM: Besides going out and get wild goats, you folks kept goats, too?

MN: Yeah, my father kept goats. The Filipino man used to come and buy the goats. My father used to keep the Cuban chickens and the Filipinos come and buy all the roosters. My father chop the neck off the hens and we ate all the hens.

MM: But the piece of property you folks had seemed really small. Where'd you find the area to keep all these animals?

MN: In the back. My father clean all in the back and put it all in the back. There was a road in the back, and the back, well, at that time, it was big. My father have all kind of animal all in the back. Chicken, the rabbit.

MM: Did all the other families do the same? Did they keep . . .

MN: I know my uncle, my father's brother (John Richardson), they had about the same kind of animals. I only remember my father, and Uncle Bill [Kauwenaole], he used to live in the front of us. He used to have chickens. And my tutu, Tutu [Henry] Gibson, they used to keep animals, too. (And Tutu Man James Kauila had a big pen with chickens.)

MM: Did you have any special chores that you remember?

MN: We had to learn how to iron our clothes. Then we'd take turns, my sister [Charlotte Holsomback] and I, in cleaning (our) house. If you do the dishes and the kitchen work, you do everything. You do the cooking, the washing of the dishes and wipe the dishes, and sweep and mop just the kitchen. And if you do the cleaning of the house, then you do all the beds, the two bedrooms, and you do the parlor, you do the ironing. That's the schedule my mom make for my sister and I. So every other week, we exchange.

MM: About how old were you when you started those things . . .

MN: Oh, probably about eight? We just do the simple one. Mom do most of the cooking. But then sometime she makes us go near the stove and cook. Easy, like corned beef or open can sardine and learn how to mix the poi. So we do simple, simple things. But my mom always there with us.

Then ironing, we had to iron all. We had to iron my uncles'. My mother used to take care of her brothers. She'd do all the laundry, (and) we had to iron everything. Stocking, handkerchief, underpants. (Mom) do all the jeans and the shirts because it's all starch, until we got a little older. Then we had to do all those--then we did everything. By then, my uncles, one by one, were getting married, so our stack was getting (smaller). Every Saturday, we had to iron. Do all our chores before we go outside

and help Papa with the outside yard. If we finish by one o'clock, because usually every week there's chapter in the movie, eh?

MM: Oh, like a serial?

MN: Yes. And so if we finish by then, then Papa let us go to the movies. Only ten cents and we go to the movie.

MM: You walk down to . . .

MN: Yeah.

MM: . . . Lāna'i City?

MN: Yeah, we walk. We walk through the [Cavendish] Golf Course and we go down to the theater. And usually our---then our friends, you know, the other neighbor kids, they all watching us. And sometimes they want us to hurry up, so everybody in the yard helping us pick up (the rubbish) and sweep out. We used to have hedges, huh, right around the yard. So we had to clean all the dry leaves underneath. So our neighbors, our friends, used to come and help us. They clean on the outside and we clean on the inside. They pick up all the rubbish. "Hurry up, hurry up." So we had to hurry up and then we all go down to the theater, especially the Keliikuli kids. They were our neighbor and they were all about the same ages as we were. Whenever we wanted to go (to a) movie or they want us to go movie, they hurry up. Everybody hurry up and help clean the yard. We had to clean our yard before we go anywhere. Even during school days when we wanted to play games. We play volleyball. We play basketball, baseball. So, when we want to go somewhere or when we have game and then the other schools come over (to Lāna'i), my friends all in the yard, and we all clean the yard. We got to trim all the hedges, and then pick up all the rubbish. Then dig all the weeds. But that time, never had too much weeds, you know. But the hedges, we had to cut all the hedges every time. Every Saturday we had to do because during the week my father busy with his work, cowboy job. So just Saturdays, then we go down the piggery---he go down the piggery and when he come home, it's about half a day work. They go down and help the old man [Bon Soon] Shin down there.

MM: I see. So, let me see. So on Saturdays you folks went to the movies, . . .

MN: Yeah, Saturdays. Sometimes Sundays.

MM: . . . you clean your house, you do all your chores, and then go to the movies. And then so what was your Sunday like?

MN: Sunday, we---well, my grandfolks used to live down at Keōmuku . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

MM: Okay, we were talking about when you used to go Keōmuku?

MN: Oh, yeah. What we used to do. Well, sometimes, after a while, I guess when we were still young yet, we used to go down Fridays. Fridays, go down Keomuku because Daddy them used to--after they finish their work up here, then they go down. Saturdays they come down. But the kids from school, we go down Fridays and we stay down there and we go church down there . . .

MM: How did you get down there?

MN: My cousins. They're a little older so they have trucks--you know those command trucks and the jeep. They come by and pick up all, whoever going. All the food, then we all go down. After work, the parents come down.

MM: After work on Saturday?

MN: Yeah, after work on Saturday. Usually half a day, they finish. And then they come down.

MM: So Friday evening, you folks went . . .

MN: Friday after school, my cousin from down the [Kaumalapau] Harbor come up with his big command truck and then they pick up all the food, everything, whatever my mother pack, and all the kids. We go down Keomuku and we stay down there every weekend. Just about every weekend until the ranch closed down in 1950 [1951], then my grandfolks moved up towards the city, and then they. . . . After a while, we were going back and forth. Not too long, couple months, I think. Then my grandfather told the members of the [Ka Lanakila O Ka Mālamalama] Church it's best if we close this church and go look for another site up there (in Lāna'i City). That's when they got the other church they using now [Ka Lanakila O Ka Mālamalama Ho'omana O Ioredane Hou Church]. I don't know what year. I think was 1952, I think.

MM: So, tell me about Keomuku.

MN: Our life in Keomuku? All right. We used to go down there every summer and we'd spend the whole three summer [months] down there with my grandfolks. My grandfolks [Daniel and Hattie Kaopuiki] teach us how to go fishing and catch crab. But during the day, all we do is swim. Swim or go feed the chicken. Take care of all the chicken. And just play, that's all we did.

MM: Were they the only people living down there at the time?

MN: Yeah.

MM: What did your grandfather [Daniel Kaopuiki, Sr.] used to do?

MN: He work for the Kō'ele ranch, take care of the windmill for the cattle. Every morning he ride his mule and there's about one, two, three, four, maybe about (seven windmills). One at Hauola, Ka'a,

Keōmuku--Keōmuku had two. Keōmuku had two, Kahe'a had one, and down Lōpā had one, or Naha, somewhere around. So, because there were still cattle, here and there, my grandpa take care of the windmill. If it runs, then he just pass by with his mule. After a while, they sent another cowboy to come over and gather up all the stray cattle. They sold it to Parker Ranch. Parker Ranch (and Kahua Ranch) bought most all the cattle.

After a while, we didn't go down there. After they closed the church down there, (and my grandfolks moved up, our family didn't go down to Keōmuku). But before then, that's all we did is spend the whole summer down there. We fish, we catch crab. The single uncles and the aunties used to come down during the week. Just check on our water. On our water or our food supply, but usually we had plenty. My grandma [Hattie Kaopuiki] makes bread. She do a lot of cooking with sheep and salt meat. Then, we had some of the friends come down. They bring a lot of vegetables and fruits, especially watermelon. Tamashiro family usually they bring all kinds of friends down there. And my grandfolks. That's all they do is drink. Be merry. The kids all over there. Sometimes we gather together and we just play music. Or we walk up to Ka'a and there's another Filipino man that used to stay there. We visit because he plants watermelon. So we go up there, eat watermelon, and he give out watermelon to take home to my grandfolks, so. And we walk. Those days, no car. And that's all we do, we walk. (Oh yeah, my great-grandma used to grow tobacco in Ka'a. She'd dry the leaves, then smoke them in her pipe.)

MM: So along that shoreline it was pretty deserted . . .

MN: Yeah, yeah. We used to pick up oranges and apples that wash up onto the shore. Sometimes you find good ones. Most of them all salty and not good. (Also, glass balls that washed up on the sand.)

MM: And then on the weekends, and then the parents would come down?

MN: Yeah. Our parents come down every weekend--Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Some parents come down Friday night. They go out fishing. That's all my uncles. They all go out with the boat. They go out fishing. Or sometimes they get (the) surround net. Everybody (doing something), go hunting. Shoot goat and they come home. Then everybody just have a party like and good time. They drink, and they sleep, and they wake up, and they going fishing again. Some of them go early. By the time the rest of the gang wake up, the fishermen coming home already. Then everybody have to learn---everybody pitch in. They clean and they cook. Oh, we used to have big gang. (My mother's family is large.)

MM: And then Sunday was reserved for church?

MN: Yeah, Sunday reserved for church. Everybody, all. Nobody stays at home. Everybody in church [Ka Lanakila O Ka Malamalama Church].

MM: Okay. How big was the congregation of the church?

MN: Oh, pretty big. Maybe about--wait. Pretty big. (About seventy people, including children, too.)

MM: And was this all family?

MN: Yeah. All family and their children. Once in a while they bring their friends down and they sleep down there. Some of them used to sleep on the porch. If not enough room, the older ones sleep on the grass. You know, they get their sleeping bag or the mat, they just hali'i the mat down and they sleep. Some of them go hunting. They just find a tree and sleep under the tree. In the morning they get up. Some of them go and some of them stay. We have the 'au'au houses in the outside washroom, eh? Everybody bathe in there. Brackish water from the tank or the well that comes into the bathroom. We had to take our own [drinking] water when we go (down Keomuku).

MM: Unless you drank brackish water?

MN: They used the brackish water for cooking. We didn't drink the brackish water. My tutu house always have those big gallons. I don't know how many gallons, but I know it's big. That's the kind they use now. They have those purified water now? You know those big kind gallon? That's the kind gallon we used to have down at my grandma's place.

MM: And so you bring just water?

MN: Yeah. (When the) family come down they bring down their water (and food).

MM: What about the other families that weren't related to the Kaopuikis, Richardsons, or whoever . . .

MN: Oh, they were all gone [i.e., moved out from Keomuku] already.

MM: . . . that lived at the ranch, did they go to church down there, too?

MN: Oh, yeah. They all stayed there at my grandfolks'.

MM: So besides the Richardsons, the Kaopuikis, . . .

MN: And the Kaopuikis . . .

MM: . . . and the Kauilas . . .

MN: . . . and the Kauilas. Kauilas, well, they had their Maunalei house, so most of the Kauilas go over there to their ('aina). But then Sunday they all come down (Keomuku for church services). (We'd all sit down for lunch after church, then clean up, pack up and

everyone goes back to Kō'e'ele and Lāna'i City. Leave my grandfolks down there.)

MM: Okay, then who else was . . .

MN: The Kwons, the Shins, the Kauwenaoles and we had the Kauwenaoles from down the harbor, too. They used to come down and stay. And, the Pavao. One daughter of the Pavao used to come down. Once in a while, the Kimokeys and the Aikalas used to come down, too. Pavao, usually Bobby. Bobby stayed with us during the summer. Aunt Louise family, the Enos family from Moloka'i, when they come over, they stay with my grandfolks.

MM: So this was pretty much a routine, then.

MN: Yeah.

MM: On weekends . . .

MN: Yeah, weekend.

MM: . . . and during the summer.

MN: Yeah.

MM: And then what, Sunday afternoon or Sunday night everybody . . .

MN: Sunday, about three o'clock, four o'clock, then everybody start cleaning up and leave my grandfolks down there. (Or the family) leave whatever. They don't leave too much food because grandma make so much during Saturday. Sunday you have to eat most all the leftover because just two (of them) and they don't have electricity down there. We use kerosene (lamps). (Grandma had an) icebox down there (which) was run by kerosene.

MM: With the block of ice?

MN: Yeah, the block of ice, and they put it on the top and that keep the food.

MM: Where did they used to get the ice from? Icebox?

MN: Sometimes they get it from Maui, they come, you know the boat go over. The young uncles go early in the morning (to Lahaina) and by afternoon they come home. Sometime they go (Lahaina to) get mangos. They just, you know, go fishing. Then they reach Lahaina. Lahaina had Grandpa's sister [Nami Makahanaloa], the Makahanaloa family. So, they can get whatever they can from there and then my uncles, sometimes my father, too, they go over Maui and then they bring it back. But usually it's my uncles. My Uncle Daniel [Kaopuiki, Jr.] and Uncle Jerry [Kaopuiki] (who captain the boat, if not my grandpa). Then the cousins of my mother's, (Aunt Martha, her husband and Uncle Andrew Kaopuiki come back on the boat to visit the

family at Keōmuku, and even my Tūtū Noa [Kaopuiki] and Tūtū Nami and her husband Joe Makahanaloa.)

MM: From Lahaina.

MN: Yeah. They stay, maybe a week or so, and when the boat go back, they all go home again. That was two places we used to stay during the summer. We either go down to stay with Tūtū Nami [Makahanaloa] in Lahaina, and then her grandchildren come over and stay with my grandfolks over here during the summer. So we rotate. And then we go over. We stay maybe one week or two weeks, and then those grandchildren all come over here. My Aunty Martha [Kaopuiki Kane], you know, they all come (over to Keōmuku).

MM: Nami [Makahanaloa] was your grandfather's sister . . .

MN: Sister.

MM: I see. Okay, so all this stopped when they relocated the church and your grandfather . . .

MN: Yeah.

MM: . . . moved up here [to Lāna'i City].

MN: When they closed the ranch, Kō'ele ranch (in the 1950s my grandfolks moved to Lāna'i City and Grandpa worked for Dole [i.e. Hawaiian Pineapple] Company as yardman--he cleans the park). Yeah.

MM: After they closed the ranch, did you ever go back down there?

MN: Yeah, we go, not that often, you know, (like) we used to. And then during the summer, well, there's nobody down there, so we don't go down there. Oh, by then we were older already.

END OF INTERVIEW

LĀNA'I RANCH

The People of Kō'ele and Keōmuku

VOLUME I

**Center for Oral History
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